

ARTICLE APPEARED
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BOSTON GLOBE
20 November 1986

Congress expected to probe CIA's reported Iran role

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By Adam Pertman
Globe Staff

WASHINGTON - The House and Senate intelligence committees, during hearings tomorrow probing the administration's decision to send arms to Iran, are also expected to discuss reported CIA efforts to court both the government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and its exiled opponents.

The CIA initiative, according to yesterday's Washington Post, began during the Carter administration to gather intelligence about Iran and support those who wanted to overthrow the Khomeini regime. An administration source told the Post that the intent also was to punish Iran for having held 52 Americans hostage.

In 1983, the paper reported, the covert operation included giving Iran a list of Soviet KGB agents and collaborators, 100 to 200 of whom were then executed. The plan, which also led to the closure of the Communist Party headquarters in Iran, apparently was meant to undermine Moscow's influence while increasing that of Washington.

Since the activities of the intelligence committees are secret, neither their members nor staff would comment directly on the details in the Post report. One source seemed to confirm its validity, however; asked in an interview yesterday whether the CIA had informed the panels of its operation, he replied: "Were I in your position, that is the conclusion that I would draw."

It is in part because the administration did not inform key legislators about the secret change of arms policy toward Iran that some in Congress are so irate, contending that Congress was deliberately circumvented. The intelligence panels' hearings are the first of a series of probes planned in the House and the Senate to get information about the policy of shipping weapons and spare parts to Iran while asking for Iran's help in getting American captives freed from Lebanon.

Both Republicans and Democrats maintain that the law stipulates that they be notified when the White House undertakes a covert activity. Had they been consulted, they say, they would have opposed the plan because it ran counter to President Reagan's policy of not bartering for the release of hostages and not sending weapons to nations that support terrorism.

Violation alleged

Rep. Jim Wright (D-Texas), who will become speaker of the House in January, yesterday said, "The president violated the law" by not informing key congressional leaders of the covert action.

Wright also provided new details on the weapons deliveries that were made before the release of three American hostages from Lebanon, based on information provided to him at a White House briefing last week. He said the shipments included 1,000 anti-tank missiles and equipment for 240 antiaircraft missiles, both of which Iran needs for its war against Iraq.

Regarding the CIA operation reported in yesterday's Post, House and Senate intelligence committee staff members said the activities would probably be raised during discussions with the one scheduled witness today: William Casey, the director of Central Intelligence.

"I would not rule out any facet of this story being included," said Steve Patterson, an aide to Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.), chairman of the subcommittee on oversight and evaluation.

"The surprise would be if it didn't come up," added David Holaday, a spokesman for Sen. David Boren (D-Okla.), the incoming chairman of the Senate panel.

Before Casey testifies, the architect of the new Iran policy, John Poindexter, the president's national security adviser, is

scheduled to brief both House members and senators. Administration officials acknowledge that Poindexter is being included, albeit informally rather than under oath, as part of an effort to appease legislators, some of whom contend that he masterminded the major policy failure of the Reagan presidency.

Policy called "consistent"

In an interview yesterday with USA Today, Poindexter asserted that the initiative had helped the administration make "significant progress" in getting hostages released and in furthering the fight against international terrorism.

The policy, he said, was "completely consistent with our objectives, with the other techniques that we are using to combat terrorism."

Skepticism is running high on Capitol Hill and in diplomatic circles about whether that is the case, and much of the questioning tomorrow is expected to focus on that issue. Sources in both the Senate and the House said the legality of the administration program, as well as the procedure used to implement it, would be examined.

Some committee members are planning to expand the questioning in order to determine how extensive the arms shipment operation was. At least two other countries, one of them Israel, have been cited in news reports as having participated with the United States in the program.

Patterson, the McCurdy aide, said the congressman "wants a full and complete disclosure of every US action pertaining to any foreign government in the last 18 months.... We want the whole layout."

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A potential complication

Some of those interviewed said that Casey could complicate matters if he does not answer questions fully and candidly during his testimony. They said they feared that his instructions from the White House would be in line with an order Reagan sent him last Jan. 17 telling him not to inform the intelligence committees of the covert operation.

The secret presidential directive reportedly was designed to absolve Casey of responsibility for not informing Congress, since he promised in writing in 1984 to inform the intelligence committees within 48 hours of any covert actions.

Indications are that some procedure like that was followed on the seven-year-old program reported by the Post about the CIA currying favor with Khomeini and his detractors, mostly groups of exiles based in France.